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MYTH AND REALITY IN TODAY'S IRAN:

Politics Amidst Chaos

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Politics Amidst Chaos

By John D. Stempel

The taking of American hostages in Iran November 4, 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan just after Christmas, the continuing negotiations over the U.S. hostages, and the abortive rescue attempt in April, 1980, have overshadowed the intense dialogue about America's close 30-year involvement with the Shah and Iran. The Iranian revolutionaries have tried to justify their extraordinary, illegal detention of diplomats by emphasizing what they conceive to be the U.S. role in the Shah's regime. For the U.S., the Iranian problem has become part of the greater strategic question of America's role in the Middle East. Our continuing inability to bring the hostage episode to an end has called into question not only our capabilities but our political will. Hence, the danger to our interests in Iran is visible and specific rather than remote and symbolic as in Afghanistan.

The acrimony accompanying Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power in February 1979 produced a number of myths and misunderstandings about what really happened in Iran. If some of the beliefs that undergirded U.S. policy were not always fully accurate, views advanced by those who challenged that policy contained incorrect perceptions as well. In fact, many of the false hopes surrounding the hostage negotiations developed out of the

misperceptions which have consistently warped American and European understanding of the political confrontation in the months following Khomeini's revolution between secular and religious forces. Analyzing some of these myths can give clues as to how the drama in Iran will be played out.

Myth I is that Khomeini's Islamic movement was destined to be victorious regardless of events because of popular opposition to the Shah. In fact, it was not even clear to the revolutionaries themselves that they would win until very late in the game. Most of the blame for the successful establishment of the revolutionary movement can be laid to the Shah's failure to understand the evolution of Iranian social forces and to take decisive, leader-like action to block the oppositionists or divert them into more cooperative endeavors. Many U.S. and European scholars had been warning of potential trouble for some time. Iran's political development had clearly lagged behind economic change, particularly after the supercharged growth spurt of 1973-76. The Shah himself began the liberalization process in 1977, but he did not really understand the political implications of that development toward dissolving support for the monarchy. He had no conception of what form liberalization ultimately would take, nor what threats to the monarchy would actually emerge. Meanwhile, the various revolutionary forces were uniting behind Khomeini as a charismatic figure. In 1977, they intensified a serious propaganda campaign directed at foreign countries as well as Iranians at home.

The Iranian "establishment," believing that the Shah's power was solid, did little to defend itself and remained ambivalent about defending the Shah's regime until it was too late. Most had grievances of some sort; even the elites who had most to gain were dissatisfied. Many other middle-class Iranians committed to the Shah's goals of modernization had begun to see their leader's governmental structure as a hinderance to their hopes because of substantial and growing corruption. Few outside Khomeini's immediate circle favored theocratic government; virtually none of his secular allies expected it to evolve as it has.

Nevertheless, "Public opinion" within Iran did not begin to turn solidly against the Shah until it became apparent in the fall of 1978 that there would be no firm, sharp Iranian government reaction to the expanded violence and unrest which was triggered by the killings at Tehran's Jaleh Square, September 9, 1979.

Subsequent regional separatism and other anti-revolutionary activity have shown that Khomeini's hold on Iran is far from secure. The taking of the U.S. Embassy hostages, while ostensibly strengthening Khomeini's hold on power has, in fact, breathed new life into the leftist challenge. The militants, many of whom are radical leftists, have succeeded in gaining their way even against Khomeini's own Revolutionary Council.

Whether Khomeini has supported them because he believes in their uncompromising position or whether he does not possess the power to challenge them makes little difference.

* We don't know this!

This leads to Myth II: The Shah's authoritarian rule forced his people to oppose him and drove them to revolution. The reality was far different--the Shah emerged as a man who could not make up his mind whether to compromise (i.e., allow the opposition a meaningful role in politics) or to repress the opposition completely. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and others tried to work out a deal with the revolutionary forces throughout the spring of 1978, but went about it in an awkward fashion, unwilling to offer any real participation in government. The Shah's earlier efforts from 1975-77 to create a single political party in support of the government foundered at the end of 1977 for precisely the same reason.

On the other hand, Iran's leader was not willing to use firm military force against the revolution--in short, he refused to fulfill Iranian and foreign expectations of strong, authoritarian leadership in the Persian tradition. He had effectively dissolved SAVAK by late August 1978 and kept the armed forces under very restrictive firing orders after martial law was imposed in September 1978. Matters came to a head on November 5 when Tehran suffered unprecedented violence and the Shah installed a military government headed by General Azhari. This was not a true military government; at least half of the civilian cabinet members remained in place, and the armed forces were still under very restrictive control. There was no real effort by the government to root out and destroy the revolutionary organization. It continued to flourish as the Shah's position

became more untenable, and thus the revolutionaries' strength continued to grow.

The military became disheartened as public support disappeared and the armed forces were left holding the bag as the only structure of power still loyal to the Shah. The Shah could organize no civilian political foundation in the months of November-December 1978, and left the country January 16, 1979. Aching to confront the revolutionaries forcefully, the armed forces were kept in check until they disintegrated following the February 9, 1979⁹ attack by the revolutionaries on Doshen Tappeh air base. Reviewing events, one is struck by the image of executive weakness and indecisiveness which unfolded. Perhaps the most intriguing suggestion made to date, and echoed by the Shah himself, has been the imputation of disloyalty by armed forces Chief of Staff General Abbas Gharabaghi and by the Shah's own Chief Imperial Inspector, General Hossein Fardust. Both are reported to have gone over to the revolutionaries; Fardust is believed to be heading SAVRAN, the new security organization created by the revolutionary government to succeed SAVAK. (SAVRAN)

Myth III concerns the U.S. role in Iran's revolutionary events. Many, including some former Iranian officials, believe the U.S. actually backed the Khomeini movement because it was displeased with the Shah or (moderate variant) that the American administration's human rights policy undercut the Shah and caused the collapse of the monarchy.

At the root of this is the feeling that either the U.S. felt the Shah was becoming "too big for his britches" after 1973, or alternately, the U.S. sought an Islamic cordon sanitaire south of the Soviet Union made up of Afghanistan, Pakistan and perhaps Iran. Despite many obvious reasons why this theory is ridiculous, it has enjoyed popularity in some quarters.

The most important reason why the U.S. would not support the movement Khomeini represented is lack of motive and capability. Why would the U.S. deliberately forfeit satisfactory to excellent relations with a government that had been helpful in many ways—protecting the Persian Gulf, selling oil to Israel—to several American presidents? Given the post-Watergate constraints on U.S. activity overseas, plus a solid public disinclination to get involved abroad, it is nonsense to suggest that the U.S. would embark on a policy of selectively destabilizing a key ally in a volatile region for essentially vague and uncertain political goals. Those who believe this are hypnotized by past U.S. involvement in Iran which both the Shah and the U.S. government, each for their own separate reasons, tended to portray as more significant than it really was.

The moderate variant--U.S. human rights policies destabilized Iran's monarchy--contains only a grain more truth. Some opposition leaders took heart from the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights, but these were the same revolutionaries castigating U.S. involvement with the Shah and the large (45,000) U.S. presence in Iran while picturing

America as standing solidly behind the regime's excesses.

Ironically, especially in view of Iran's poor human rights record since the Khomeini takeover, the Iranian government in this period (1977-78) was responding to criticisms of its human rights record and to suggestions privately expressed by the U.S. and others. There never was, however, any hard policy linkage between human rights measures and other issues. Secretary of State Vance specifically disavowed this in the case of weapons purchases after the 1977 CENTO meeting in Tehran.

The Shah's perceptions of uncertainty about U.S. reaction to forceful measures against revolutionaries may have inhibited Iranian government activities. It is from this perspective that former Iranian government officials will undoubtedly criticize U.S. human rights policies toward Iran. The bald fact remains: Iranian government officials, both civilian and military, never were pressured by official U.S. actions or threats. Ultimately, the responsibility for acting or not acting belongs with those Iranians, and especially the Shah, who held power. They cannot excuse their own uncertainties by insisting that "the Americans undercut us."

Myth IV involves another criticism of U.S. policy: The U.S. did not know what was going on in Iran because it was not in touch with the opposition and completely misunderstood the nature of the Iranian revolution. In fact, the U.S. was considerably better informed about the nature of this revolution from 1977 until mid-1979 than any other country represented in Tehran.

This was true even though it is common knowledge that world-wide U.S. embassy resources for foreign political and economic reporting have been substantially reduced over the past 10-12 years. Despite suspicions of U.S. intentions, U.S. reporting officers were able to deal with virtually all opposition groups of any significance except the Marxist-oriented Fedayeen, who turned down more than one overture.

Why wasn't such information translated into 20/20 foresight? Senior levels of the U.S. government were concerned with other things (the unfolding Camp David talks between Egypt and Israel, for example), and standard difficulties of ambiguity in prediction and analysis were intensified by three particular factors in the Iranian case. These considerations distinctly increased organizational misunderstanding of Iran's problems at both top and middle levels of the government's policy decisionmaking process. Some of them continue today.

First was the question of unclear information in very fluid circumstances. From January-September 1978 events were more confused than the U.S. government's critics have claimed. It was by no means obvious that the Shah or others in Iran acting in his name would neither bring off a meaningful compromise with religious leaders or opposition politicians nor be able to suppress the revolution by force. U.S. mission reporting made this ambiguity clear. Multiple interpretations were easily possible. Under these circumstances, as students of policy/decision making have noted, "groupthink" and other

pressures on objective assessment and action came into play more than usual.

The second factor was (and still is) a conceptual one. Neither American reporting officers nor analysts nor academic students of Persian and Middle Eastern politics fully understood the explosive potential of religion as a political weapon. A review of the published literature on Iran for the past 18 months reveals a perceptual gap in this regard pervasive enough to suggest basic deficiencies in the way American social science is equipped to deal with the political impact of religious movements and emotions. Some authors were more prescient than others, but no one has yet come up with a comprehensive framework for handling overriding religious considerations in politics.

The final factor clouding perceptions is the nature of the events themselves. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the unfolding Iranian revolution is the lack of any single occurrence explicitly heralding major change in Iran. Of course there were important 1978 benchmarks—the January Qom riots, the February Tabriz riots, the August burning of the Abidan movie house, September's Jaleh Square riot and subsequent shootings, the burning of substantial parts of Tehran in November and the mass marches of December. Each, in and of itself, was not enough to penetrate the threshold of attention of high level policy/decision makers, for whom time is at a premium. Those closer to the scene foresaw the danger earlier. Warnings from both embassy and media circles were not sufficient to call forth

a major governmental reanalysis such as that involved in Truman's 1950 decision to commit U.S. forces to Korea or President Kennedy's 1962 decision to confront the U.S.S.R. over its placement of offensive missiles in Cuba. Substantial additional resources and high level attention were not focused on Iran until the end of 1978. After that full policy review, it was almost too late for any action other than post-hoc adjustment. The baggage of our historical connection with Iran evidently weighed heavily, especially as the whole question of the U.S. presence in Iran took on a major anti-Shah cast. Perhaps the U.S. government's willingness to "walk the extra mile" in restraint during the hostage crisis stems in part from this as well as Myth V.

Myth V is the belief that the U.S. could somehow normalize ties with the Khomeini revolution after February 1979. In short, the U.S. and Iran could "do a deal." Not even the insulting Iranian responses to U.S. efforts to free the hostages have fully destroyed this myth, which developed by confusing a basic U.S. desire to retain access to Iranian oil and prevent Soviet encroachment in Iran with some wishful thinking about the nature of the post-revolutionary Iranian governing elites. Having had some contact with the more moderate elements of the secular side of the revolution, and desiring to minimize the difficulty in reestablishing relations, the U.S. underestimated the degree to which the fundamentalist religious and Arab radical elements of the revolutionary leadership hate and suspect the U.S. more than

they fear the Soviet Union. Perhaps the best recent evidence of this perceptual difficulty is that American newsmen continue to refer to President Bani-Sadr as a "moderate". He is nothing of the sort; he is a radical who happens to believe that release of the American hostages is a prerequisite for reshaping Iran into an "Islamic socialist" society rooting out all vestiges of U.S. influence.

By moving toward a policy of accommodation in mid-79, before the revolutionary moderates had consolidated their power, the U.S. revived suspicions that it was more interested in overthrowing Iran's revolution than cooperating with it. When the Shah was admitted to the U.S. for medical treatment, Iran's leftists and radicals concluded that this was not a humanitarian act but the beginning of a reactionary plot. The Bazargan government, weak since its inception, was powerless to prevent the left and the Moslem radicals from moving in on the American Embassy. Iran's religious forces had been gradually undercutting leftist influence until that time. Seizing the U.S. Embassy gave the left new prestige and position which Bani-Sadr or any future Iranian leader must diminish. Moreover, the divisions among the militants at the embassy as well as the internal struggle between Bani-Sadr and the Islamic Republican Party, reflected most recently in the parliamentary elections, suggest the hostages are and will remain markers in Iranian politics. Ayatollah Beheshti, a moderate on the hostage issue until Bani-Sadr's election as president, is now firmly against giving the hostages back before

good point

the Iranian parliament has a chance to decide their fate. Khomeini's repeated insistence that only parliament can decide the fate of the hostages is a formula for continued demands on the U.S. and further delay over the hostage question, not a suggestion for resolving the crisis.

The analysis that flows from these five misconceptions must be corrected. The hostage episode and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan pose substantial problems involving Iran for U.S. policy makers. Public reaction to the seizure of the hostages will undoubtedly call for additional penalties against Iran after the hostages are returned. On the other hand, strategic considerations suggest leaving open the possibility of evolving a relationship with whatever government eventually emerges. This does not preclude options involving the use of force against Iran to resolve the hostage crisis. Indeed, modest military action may be required to reestablish minimum levels of U.S. credibility in the area. Should Iran collapse into chaos from within--a likely outcome--then standby forces might be helpful for rescuing U.S. hostages, or retrieving them from groups into whose hands they fall. Given the hostile dynamics of Iranian political maneuvering over the hostages, there will be no hope of a negotiated solution that would preserve any element of respect for the U.S. in Iran or elsewhere. There should be no question of any kind of direct diplomatic ties until the hostages are no longer captives.

The U.S. has accepted the fact of Iran's revolution and probably will deal with it in the interests of higher U.S. strategic goals. The Shah's move to Egypt, despite his failing health, has triggered renewed paranoia among Iran's rulers about U.S. efforts to overthrow the revolution and restore the Shah. Iran's revolutionary circles have never accepted either U.S. willingness to deal with the revolution--their hostility runs too deep--or American protestations that it is not trying to undo the Ayatollah. Even earlier, President Bani-Sadr himself said the Soviet threat should not be an excuse to allow the U.S. to gain a new foothold in Iran. The day before the Shah's move to Egypt, Iranian Defense Minister Mustafa Chamran announced confidently that Iran expected the U.S. to counter any Soviet attack on Iran. Most revolutionaries probably see no inconsistency between Bani-Sadr's statement and the holding of hostages on one hand, and Chamran's remarks on the other.

In view of the contradictions in Iranian thinking and the dynamics of hostility that indicate no negotiated solution to the crisis is possible, some basic truths suggest themselves: The U.S. should be much more reserved in its dealings with Iran's present government. Because of our attachment to the prospect of a deal, we have given Iran signals of weakness and unintentionally undercut the moderates while the radicals have been able to argue that the U.S. will do nothing. Assuming a post-hostage period eventually arrives, there is no reason for an official American presence in Iran. The interests of both

countries can be adequately met in other ways. Our European allies can best represent the West in Iran for the foreseeable future. The withdrawal of all U.S. official personnel would eliminate a major source of suspicion and fear among anti-western Iranians and remove from Iranian internal politics one of the few issues which unites extreme right and extreme left. Our ultimate deterrent posture vis-a-vis the Soviet Union would not be affected.

Regardless of the outcome of the hostage crisis, Iran faces substantial continued internal turmoil as it struggles with competing value systems. There is little the U.S. can or should do for the present. The Iranian government must still get itself organized. In the current circumstances U.S. interests are best served by a wait-and-see attitude. Iranians will undoubtedly resume trading with U.S. if they see it in their interest to do so. In terms of deterring violations of diplomatic rights, Iran should probably be punished in some way if the present government remains in power but the U.S. should not organize a vendetta to continue Iran's isolation from the community of nations once the hostages have been released. Long-term, American interests will be best protected by not offering an obvious target for scapegoat status. This would only serve to advance the interests of those within Iran less committed to Persian independence within the broader strategic equation involving the Soviet Union.

May 8, 1980

J.D.Stempel

Notes on Tomorrow's Iran

1. The government will gradually loose its grip and chaos is the most likely outcome.
2. There is little we can do about the hostages other than to keep discreet pressure on Iran, and hope that random groups, such as the tribes, can perhaps liberate groups of hostages when times are ripe.
3. The GOI will not be disposed to negotiate if we are too forthcoming, and will not be forthcoming at all unless they believe we are ~~xxxxxx~~ taking action of some kind. The failure of the rescue attempt appears to have convinced some of the religious groups that we mean to do something. If conditions develop so that they feel the hostages are a liability rather than an asset, they might work something out. A stand-off posture, however, is better for us right now to induce this belief. 25X1

5. In the longer term, we really have to begin to check out the exile possibilities. My sources indicate that the exiles may be, or have already, getting together in Paris or Geneva. Perhaps this is not really a State function, but we ought to have an input.

6. The dynamics of the situation are likely to revolve around how we handle a collapsing internal situation. If State is to truly take the lead in overall ~~xxxx~~ policy formulation, we have at least got to have some representation on the military contingency planning side. For example, If Iran ~~xxx~~ collapses in civil war, it may be possible to use special forces or the 1800-man Marine detachment to secure come of our hostages.